"MISTRESS"

by Lara Vapnyar

https://opencity.org/archive/issue-15/mistress

The dermatologist had a mistress. For the past few weeks, it had been the main topic of 
conversation in his white waiting room, decorated with a lonely, lopsided palm in the corner and 
bright dermatology posters. There were about eight patients seated on red patent-leather chairs, 
most of them Russians, because of the office location on Kings Highway, a Russian area of 
Brooklyn. The doctor even had a few Russian newspapers, lying along with dated issues of Time 
and Sports Illustrated in a plastic magazine rack. Nobody was interested in them though.

"He took her to Aruba in November. The mistress," Misha's grandmother was confiding in Russian to 
a gray-haired woman in a sports jacket, sneakers, and long skirt. "Aruba," Misha corrected her 
mentally. He tried to read a book, but the grandmother's excited whisper filled with fat, rich words like 
"Aruba" or "mistress" wouldn't let him concentrate. Sometimes she attempted to talk to a woman in a 
gray beret, seated next to Misha. To do that she leaned over Misha, putting her heavy elbow on his 
knee for balance. He had to press his opened book to his chest and wait until she was through, 
trying to keep his face away from her mixed aroma of sweat, valerian root drops, and dill. "First he 
went on vacation with his wife, but the mistress made a scene, and he had to take her too. They are 
all like that, you know." The gray-haired woman nodded. At some point, other Russian patients came 
closer and stayed there to chat. "You mean doctor Levy has a mistress?" "Yes," the gray-haired 
woman said eagerly. "He even took her to Aruba." And Misha's grandmother looked at her with 
reproach, because she wanted to be the one to tell about Aruba.

Every second Thursday, after school, Misha had to take his grandmother to the dermatologist. He 
served as an interpreter, because the grandmother didn't speak English. He didn't mind these 
visits—there wasn't much to translate. Doctor Levy, a small, skinny man with dark circles under his 
eyes, just glanced at the sores on her ankles, scribbled something in the chart, and asked: "How's it 
going?" Grandmother said "Better" in Russian and Misha translated it into English. Misha didn't mind 
The eye doctor and the dentist either. Misha was saved by his grandfather from visits to a 
gynecologist. "A nine-year-old boy has no business in a gynecologist's office," he said firmly, 
surprising everybody, because since they had come to America it was a rarity to hear him argue, to 
hear him speak at all. Misha was happy—for some reason he was afraid of pregnant women with 
their inflated bellies, fat ankles, and wobbly domineering way of walking. His mother had to take 
several hours off work to take the grandmother there. She complained about it and looked at Misha 
and the grandfather with reproach.

Nobody saved Misha from monthly visits to an internist. This doctor let Misha and his grandmother 
into his sparkling cabinet with cream-colored walls covered with diplomas, and walked confidently to 
his large mahogany desk. He sat there tall and lean, with a thick mane of bluish-white hair, red face,
and very clean white hands, listening patiently to the grandmother's complaints. Unlike other doctors, he never interrupted her. Misha would have preferred if he did. "My problem is . . ." she would begin with a sigh of anticipation. She prided herself on being able to describe her symptoms with vividness and precision. "You should've been a writer, Mother," Misha's father once said, when she described perspiration as a "heavy shower pouring from under my skin." Misha's mother looked lost. She didn't know if she should smile at the joke or scold her husband for being ironic about her mother. She chose to smile then. "No, a doctor," Misha's grandmother corrected, oblivious to his irony. "I would've become a doctor if I hadn't devoted my life to my husband."

While she talked to the doctor, Misha usually stared down, following the pattern on the checkered beige and brown linoleum floor with his eyes, the pattern broken at places with furniture legs and his grandmother's feet in wide black sneakers. Her words were loud and clear, emphasized by occasional groans and changes of tone. "I can't have a bowel movement for days, but I have to go to the bathroom every few hours. It usually happens like this. I feel the urge and go to the bathroom immediately. I push very hard, but nothing happens. I come out, but I feel as if a heavy rock is in there inside me, weighing down my bowels. I go in and try again." The grandmother pressed one of her feet hard onto the floor when she was describing the "heavy rock." Misha looked at her thick dark stockings. She brought a big supply of them from Russia, along with a supply of wide striped garters. Misha felt how the edge of his patent-leather chair became moist and slippery under his clutched fingers. He also felt that he was blushing all over, especially in his ears. He wondered if the doctor noticed how red they were. But he didn't look at Misha, he looked at the grandmother with a patient, polite smile.

"Come on," Misha thought, "stop her. There must be other patients waiting." But the doctor didn't move. Maybe he used these minutes to sleep with his eyes open. "When at last it happens, I feel exhausted, I feel as if I had won a battle. My head aches and I have a heartbeat so severe that I have to take forty drops of valerian root, lie down, and stay like that for at least an hour." When the grandmother was through, she turned to Misha. The doctor turned to him too, keeping the same polite and patient expression on his face. Misha thought about darting out the door, past the receptionist, past the waiting room, onto the street. He thought about rushing out the window, a large clean window with a plastic model of a split human head on a windowsill. He could see himself falling onto the grass, then rising to his feet and running away from the office. But he didn't jump. He sat there, thinking how to avoid mentioning "heavy rock" or the grandmother's sitting in the bathroom. "Um . . . she . . . my grandmother . . . her problem is . . . she has a . . . she often gets a headache and her heart beats very fast." The doctor smiled at Misha approvingly and wrote a prescription with his beautiful, very clean hands. "Tylenol!" his grandmother later complained loudly in the dermatologist's waiting room. "Look at the American doctors! I tell him that I have constipation and he gives me Tylenol! Can you believe that?" The Russian patients eagerly sympathized. Misha hid his burning ears behind The Great Pictorial Guide to the Prehistoric World. He wished they would switch to the safer subject of the dermatologist's mistress.
Once, they saw her. She flung the door open and walked straight to Dr. Levy's office, not smiling, staring ahead. She was a short stout woman in her late thirties, with short reddish-brown hair, in tight white jeans and a shiny leather jacket. She was clomping with her high-heeled boots and tinkling with her gold bracelets as she walked. She was swinging car keys in her hand. Everybody in the room went silent and followed her with their eyes, even Misha. She had a beautiful mouth, painted bright red. "Shameless!" somebody hissed in Russian. Maybe it was Misha's grandmother.

At home, Misha did his homework in their long white kitchen, because in his mother's opinion it was the only place that had proper light and wasn't too drafty. For about a year, four of them—he, his mother, his grandfather, and his grandmother—had been living in this one-bedroom apartment with unevenly painted walls, faded brown carpet, and secondhand furniture. Everything in the apartment seemed to belong to someone else. Misha and his mother slept in the bedroom, Misha on a folding bed. The grandmother and grandfather slept on the sofa bed in the living room. Or rather it was his grandmother who slept, snoring softly. The grandfather seemed to be awake all night. Whenever Misha woke up, he heard the grandfather tossing and groaning or pacing heavily on the creaky kitchen floor.

In Russia, they had separate apartments. They even lived in different cities. His grandparents lived in the south of Russia, in a small town overgrown with apple and peach trees. Misha and his mother and father lived in Moscow, before his father left to live with another woman. In Moscow, Misha had his own room, a very small one, not bigger than six square meters, where the wallpaper was patterned with tiny sailboats. Misha had his own bed and his own desk with a lamp shaped as a crocodile. His books were shelved neatly above the desk, his toys were kept in two plywood boxes beside his bed. When his parents were arguing, they said: "Misha, go to your room!" But during the last months before his father left, they didn't have time to send him to his room. They argued almost constantly: started suddenly, without any warning, in the middle of a matter-of-fact conversation, during dinner, while playing chess, while watching TV, and ended after Misha had gone to bed, or maybe they didn't end at all. Misha went to his room himself. He sat on a little woven rug between his bed and his desk, playing with his building blocks and listening to the muffled sounds of his parents yelling. He played very quietly.

Misha liked doing homework, although he would have never admitted that. He laid out his books, papers, pencils, so that they took almost all the surface of the table. He loved coloring maps, drawing diagrams, doing math problems, he even loved spelling exercises—he was pleased with the sight of his handwriting, the sight of the firm, clear, rounded letters. Most of all he loved that during homework time nobody bothered him. "Shh! Michael's studying," everybody said. Even his grandmother, who usually cooked dinner while Misha was studying, was silent, almost silent—she quietly hummed a theme from a Mexican soap opera that she watched every day on the Spanish channel. Her Spanish was not much better than her English, but she said that in Mexican shows you didn't need words to understand what's going on.
The other thing she loved to watch on TV were weather reports, where you didn't need words either: a picture of sun was for a good day, raindrops for drizzle, rows of raindrops for heavy rain. Misha's mother was against subscribing to a Russian TV channel, because she thought it would prevent them from adjusting to American life. For the same reason, she insisted that everybody called Misha "Michael." Misha's mother was well-adjusted. She watched news on TV, rented American movies, and read American newspapers. She worked in Manhattan and wore to work the same clothes that Misha had seen in the waiting room's magazines, but her skirts were longer and the heels of her shoes shorter and heavier.

The problem with the homework was that it only took Misha about forty minutes. He tried to prolong it as much as he could. He did all the extra math problems from the section "You Might Try It." He brought his own book and read it, pretending that it was an English assignment. He stopped from time to time as if he had a problem and had to think it over, but he just sat there, watching his grandmother cook. She took all these funny packages, string bags, plastic bags, paper bags, bowls, and wrapped plates out of the refrigerator and put them on the counter, never forgetting to sniff at each of them first. Then she opened the oven with a loud screech, gasping, and saying, "Sorry, Michael," took out saucepans and skillets, put them on the stove, filled some of them with water and greased others with chicken fat (she always kept some chicken fat handy, not trusting oil or cooking spread). While the saucepans and skillets gurgled and hissed on the stove, the grandmother washed and chopped the contents of packages and bowls, using two wooden boards—one for meat, the other for everything else. Misha always marveled at how fast her short and swollen fingers were. In a matter of seconds heaps of colorful cubes disappeared in the saucepans and skillets under chipped enameled lids. "I was wise," the grandmother often said to her waiting-room friends. "I brought all the lids here. In America it's impossible to find a lid that fits." The women agreed; something was definitely wrong with American lids. To make ground meat, the grandmother used a hand-operated, metallic meat grinder, also brought from Russia. She had to summon the grandfather into the kitchen, because the grinder was too heavy—she couldn't turn the handle herself, she couldn't even lift it. The grandfather put his newspaper down and came in obediently, shuffling with his slippers as he walked, with the same tired, resigned expression that he had when he followed the grandmother home from the Russian food store, carrying bulging bags printed with a stretched, red "Thank You." He took his dark checkered shirt off and put it on the chair. (The grandmother insisted that he do that. "You don't want pieces of raw meat all over your shirt!") He put an enameled bowl of meat cubes in front of him and secured the grinder on the windowsill. He stood leaning over it, dressed in a white undershirt and dark woolen trousers. He brought five good suits that he used to wear to work in Russia to America. Now he wore the trousers at home and the jackets hung in a closet with mothballs in their pockets. The grandfather took hold of a rusty meat-grinder handle and turned it slowly, with effort at first, then faster and faster. His flabby pale shoulders were shaking and tiny beads of sweat came out on his puffy cheeks, long rounded nose and shiny head. The grandmother sometimes tore herself from her cooking and made comments: "What have you got, crooked fingers?" or "Here, you dropped a piece again" or "I hope I will have this meat ground by next year." She never talked to him like that in Russia. In Russia, when he came home from work, she rushed to
serve him dinner and put two spoonfuls of sour cream into his sour cream herself. The grandfather sucked the soup in loudly and talked a lot during dinner. Now he didn't even answer the grandmother. He just stood there, clutching the meat-grinder handle with yellowed knuckles, turning it even faster, which made his face redden and blue twisted veins on his neck bulge. His stare was focused on something far away out the window. Misha thought that maybe his grandfather wanted to jump, like he wanted to in the doctor's office. Only their apartment was on the sixth floor.

While the food was cooking, the grandmother went to get her special ingredient, dill. She kept darkened, slightly wilted bunches spread out on an old newspaper on the windowsill. She took one and crushed it into a little bowl with her fingers, to put it in every dish that she cooked. At dinner, everything had the taste of dill: soup, potatoes, meat stew, salad. In fact, dinner hardly tasted like anything else but dill—the grandmother didn't trust spices, put very little salt in the food, and no pepper at all. Misha watched how she moved from one saucepan to another, dressed in a square-shaped dark cotton dress, drying her moist red face and her closely cropped gray hair with a piece of cloth, sweeping potato peels off the counter, groaning when one fell to the floor and she had to pick it up. He couldn't understand why she put so much work into the preparation of this food, which was consumed at dinner in twenty minutes, in silence, and didn't even taste good.

Misha couldn't pretend to be busy with his homework forever. Eventually the grandmother knew that he was done. She watched a weather report on TV, and if nothing indicated a natural disaster sent Misha to a playground with his grandfather. "Go, go," she would yell at the grandfather, who sat on the sofa in his unbuttoned checkered shirt buried in a Russian newspaper. "Go, walk with the boy, make yourself useful for a change!" And the grandfather would stand up, groaning, go to the bathroom mirror to check if he should shave, usually decide against it. Then he would button his shirt, tuck it into his trousers, and say gloomily: "Let's go, Michael." Misha knew that after they left, the grandmother would take over the Russian newspaper. She would put her glasses on (she had two pairs, both made from cheap plastic, one light blue, the other pink), and slump on the sofa, making the springs creak. She would sit there with her feet planted far apart and read the classifieds section, the singles ads. She would circle some with a red marker she borrowed from Misha, to show them later to Misha's mother, who would laugh in the beginning, then get irritated, then get upset and yell at the grandmother.

All the way to a playground, while they passed redbrick apartment buildings and rows of private houses with little boys in yarmulkes and little girls in long flowery dresses playing on sidewalks, Misha's grandfather walked a few steps ahead, with his hands folded on his back, staring down at his feet, never saying a word.

Back in Russia, it was different, maybe because Misha was younger then. When he spent summers at his grandparents' place, the grandfather took him to a park willingly, without being asked. He talked a lot while they strolled along the paths of a dark, dense forest: about trees, animals, about how fascinating even the most ordinary things that surround us could be. Little Misha didn't try to
grasp the meaning of the words. They just reached him along with other noises: a rustle of a tree, a bird's squawk, a nasty screech of gravel as he ran his sandal-clad toes through it. It was the sound of the grandfather's voice that was important to him. They walked slowly, Misha's little hand lying securely in the grandfather's big sweaty one. From time to time Misha had to release his hand and wipe it against his pants, but then he hurried to take the grandfather's hand back.

Now, once they reached the playground and stepped on its black spongy floor, the grandfather said: "Okay, go play, Michael." Then he passed round the place, searching for Russian newspapers left on benches. He usually found two or three and walked to a big flat tree stump, in the farthest corner from the domino tables, where a heated crowd of old Russian men gathered, and from the benches where old Russian women sat discussing their own ailments and other people's mistresses. There, for the full hour that they were on the playground, he sat unmoving, except to turn the newspaper pages. Misha didn't know how he was supposed to play. Three-year-olds on their tricycles rode all over the soft black surface of the playground. The slide was occupied by shrieking six-year-olds, the swings by little babies, rocked by their mothers or by fat teenage girls, who had to squeeze their bottoms hard to fit between the chains. Misha usually walked to the tallest slide, stepping over dabs of chewing gum and pools of melted ice cream. He climbed up to the very top and crawled into a plastic hut. There he sat huddled on a low plastic bench. Sometimes he brought a book with him. He liked thick serious books about ancient civilizations, archaeological expeditions, and animals who became extinct millions of years ago. But most of the time it was too noisy there to read. Then Misha simply stared down at the playground that seemed to move and stir like a big restless animal, and at his immobile grandfather.

The notice about the English class was printed in bold black letters on pink neon paper. The color was so bright that it arrested your look wherever the notice was lying. Since the beginning of March it could be seen lying anywhere in the apartment: on the kitchen table, in the bedroom on a crumpled pillow, on the toilet floor between a broom and a Macy's catalog, stuffed under the sofa (the grandmother pulled it out from there, blew the pellets of dust off it, smoothed it with her hands, and scolded the grandfather angrily). Everybody studied it, read it, or at least looked at it. It was being discussed if the grandfather should go. He fit the description perfectly. Any legal immigrant who lived in the country less than two years and possessed basic knowledge of English was invited to attend a three-month long class of American conversation. "Rich in idioms," was stated in letters bigger than the rest. "Free of charge," in even bigger letters. "It's an excellent program, Father!" Misha's mother raved at dinner, pulling bones out of catfish stew on her plate. "Taught by American teachers, real teachers, native speakers! Not by Russian old ladies, who confuse all the tenses and claim that it's classic British grammar." At first, the grandfather tried to ignore her. But Misha's mother was persistent. "You're rotting alive, Father! Think how wonderful it would be if you had something to do, something to look forward to." Misha's grandmother made dishes clatter, moved chairs with a screech, and often interrupted this conversation with questions like "Where are the matches? I just put them right here" Or "Do you think this fish is overcooked?" She was offended that nobody thought of her going to the class, even though she knew that the words "basic knowledge of English"
hardly applied to her. The best she could do was spell her first name. The last name required Misha's help. But Misha's mother couldn't be distracted by the grandmother's questions or clattering of dishes. "You'll begin to speak in no time, Father. You know grammar, you have vocabulary, you just need a push." The grandfather only bent his neck lower and sipped his tea, muttering that it was all nonsense and that in their area of Brooklyn you hardly ever needed English. "What about yours and mother's appointments?! Michael and I are tired of taking you there all the time. Right, Michael?" Misha's mother said, and moved their large porcelain teapot, preventing her from seeing Misha's face across the table. Misha nodded. It was decided that the grandfather would go.

On the first day of class, the grandfather took one of his jackets from a hanger and put it on, on top of his usual checkered shirt. He asked Misha if he had a spare notebook. Misha gave him a notebook with a marble cover, a sharp pencil, and a ballpoint pen. The grandfather put it all in a plastic "Thank You" bag. In the hall, he took from the top shelf of a closet the box with his Russian leather shoes, and asked Misha if they needed shines. Misha did not know, and the grandfather shoved the box back and put his sneakers on. He shuffled out to the elevator, holding the bag under his arm.

From then on, for two nights a week—the class was held on Mondays and Wednesdays—they had dinner without the grandfather. His absence didn't make much difference, except maybe that Misha's mother and the grandmother bickered a little more. It usually started with a clipping from a Russian newspaper, a big colorful ad—"Come to our party and meet your destiny! Price: fifty dollars (food and drink included)"—and ended with Misha's mother yelling: "Why do you want to marry me off? So you can drive the next one away?" and the grandmother reaching for a valerian root drops bottle. "I never said a bad word to your husband," the grandmother said plaintively. "You said plenty of your words to me. Didn't spare money in long-distance calls!" "I only wanted to open your eyes!" Then Misha's mother rushed out of the kitchen and the grandmother was yelling at her back, carefully counting the drops into her tea cup: "How can you be so ungrateful! I came to America to help you. I left everything and came here for your sake!"

Misha's mother came to America for Misha's sake. She said it to him once, after she came back from a parent-teacher conference. She came home and said: "Come with me to the bedroom, Michael." He went, feeling his hands getting sweaty and his ears red, although he knew that he didn't do anything bad at school. His mother sat on the edge of the bed and removed her high-heeled shoes, then pulled off her pantyhose. "The teacher says you don't talk, Michael. You don't talk at all. Not in class, not during the recess." She was rubbing her pale feet with small crooked toes. "Your English is fine, you have excellent marks on your tests. You have excellent marks in every subject. Yet, you're not going to make it to the top class!" She left her feet alone and began to cry, spreading black paint around her eyes. "Your English is fine, you have excellent marks on your tests. You have excellent marks in every subject. Yet, you're not going to make it to the top class!" She left her feet alone and began to cry, spreading black paint around her eyes. She said to him, sniffing, that he, his future, was the only reason why she came to America. Then she walked to the bathroom to wash her face, leaving her rolled-down pantyhose on the floor—two soft dark circles joined together. From the bathroom she yelled to him: "Why don't you talk, Michael?"
It wasn't true that he didn't talk at all. When asked a question, he gave an accurate answer, but he tried to make it as brief as possible. He never volunteered to talk. He registered everything that was said in class, he made comments and counter-arguments in his head, he even made jokes. But something prevented these already formed words from coming out of his mouth. He felt the same way when his father called on Saturdays. Misha spent a whole week preparing for his call, he had thousands of things to tell him. In his head, he told him everything that had happened in school, he described his classmates, his teachers. He wanted to talk about things he read in books, about lost cities, volcanoes, and weird animals. In his head, Misha even laughed, imagining how he would tell his father all the funny stories he read about dinosaurs, and how his father would laugh with him. But when his father called, Misha went numb. He answered questions but never volunteered to speak and never asked anything himself. He sat with the phone on his bed, facing the wall and hooking old layers of paint with his fingernail. He could hear his father's impatient, disappointed breathing on the other end of the line. Misha thought that his reluctance to talk could be the reason for his father's not calling some weeks.

Now the grandfather had to do his homework too. Misha came home from school and found him at the kitchen table in Misha's usual place with his notebooks and dictionaries spread across the table. The grandfather even cut himself little colorful cards out of construction paper and wrote down difficult words from the dictionary on them: an English word on one side, a Russian meaning on the other. He studied seriously and couldn't be bothered during that time. The grandmother had to go to the Russian food store alone, and she usually brought back smaller, lighter bags because she couldn't carry heavy things. Nobody used the meat grinder now. It was stored in a cupboard along with other useless things brought from Russia: baking sheets, funny shaped molds, a small dented samovar, a gadget for removing sour cherry stones. The grandmother wasn't happy about it. She muttered that she had the whole household on her shoulders and threw looks of reproach at her husband. Misha's mother said: "Please leave him alone; Father has to learn something, it's only for three months anyway." Misha wondered if the grandfather enjoyed his homework as much as he did. He also wondered if the grandfather cheated like he did, pretending that his homework took much more time than it really did.

About three weeks after the class started, the grandfather took the box with his leather shoes down from the shelf. He went to a shoe store and bought a small bottle of dark-brown shoe polish. To do that he had to look up the English word for "shoe polish" in a dictionary. Before each class, he polished his shoes zealously with a piece of cloth. "I don't want the teacher to think that Russians are pigs," he mumbled, answering the grandmother's stare. He sat squatted, with his head down, and his face and neck were very red, as red as they were when he said that he wasn't making enough progress and had to go for extra lessons on Saturdays. The grandmother was putting things into a cupboard when he said that. She shut the white cupboard door with a satisfied boom. "All that studying and you are not making progress!" One evening the grandfather got up from the sofa, put on his jacket, put some money in the pocket, walked to Kings Highway, and came back with a new shirt, a light-blue one with dark-blue stripes. "It was on sale," was all he said to the grandmother.
"'It was on sale!' was all he said to me," Misha's grandmother announced in the dermatologist's waiting room. "If I didn't know him, I would have thought he had a mistress." Her listeners, two Russian women, one wearing a thick knitted beret of a lustrous purple color and the other a plain black one, nodded to her sympathetically. "But I do know him." The grandmother grinned and raised one brow to emphasize her words. She looked meaningfully at the women, leaned closer to them, and whispered something. "That—for several years now," she added. The woman in a purple beret said: "But this is good, this is better." The grandmother considered her words and said: "Yes, yes, this is better, of course."

Misha imagined his grandfather with a mistress, with the dermatologist's mistress, because she was the only mistress he'd seen. He imagined his grandfather strolling with her along a Sheepshead Bay embankment among other couples, one of her hands sticking out of the shiny leather sleeve holding his grandfather's hand, her other hand swinging car keys. Then he imagined her kissing the grandfather on a cheek and leaving a mark with her bright red lipstick. The grandfather would wrinkle his nose and rush to wipe it off, the way Misha always did when his mother kissed him after work. The image of his serious grandfather vigorously rubbing his cheek made Misha smile.

Sheepshead Bay was the place where the grandfather took Misha for his evening walks now. For a few weeks after the class began they continued to go to the playground, but the Russian newspapers were abandoned. The grandfather took his colorful word cards with him. He spread them on his stump securing each with a small stone to prevent the wind from picking them up. Sometimes he read them slowly, in whispers or with his lips moving or with his eyes. But more often he just looked around with an incredulous expression as if he saw all this for the first time. Then one day, the grandfather said that he was going to take Michael to Sheepshead Bay to look at the ships and breathe the fresh ocean air. The grandmother protested at first, saying that it's a long walk, and it's windy there, and the boy might catch cold. But the grandfather was firm, almost as firm as he used to be back in Russia. He said that the boy needs exercise and that's that.

On Sheepshead Bay, they didn't stop to look at the ships. They crossed the creaky wooden bridge and proceeded along the embankment, passing fishermen, tall trees, and chipped green benches occupied by lonely looking women. At the end of the path they turned back and repeated their route three or four times. The grandfather walked ahead, maybe a little faster than usual, limping slightly in his stiff leather shoes. He stared ahead, sometimes turning to look in the direction of the trees and benches. A few times Misha had an impression that the grandfather nodded to somebody on one bench. Once he slipped on a fish head on the pavement and almost fell while looking in that direction. Misha made frequent stops to look at the fishermen's shiny tackles, fish heads, and tails they used for bait, and the inside of their white plastic buckets, which were usually empty. When the wind was so strong that it chilled Misha's ears and tried to tear his little Yankees cap off his head, there were sharp dark waves in the water, and Misha could see fish jumping with a big splash. While somebody was pulling his fishing rod out, Misha followed it with his eyes, holding his breath and licking his lips. He hoped at least once to see a fish being caught. When the grandfather's class was
over, Misha was sure that they wouldn't come here anymore. He would have to go back to the plastic hut on the playground, which would get hot in summer and smell of burnt rubber.

The grandmother had all her appointments written down on a big wall calendar. It hung next to refrigerator, a bright spot on a pale kitchen wall. It was called "Russian Famous Monasteries," printed in Germany and bought on Brighton Beach. Below the beautiful, glossy picture of the Zagorsk Monastery, with golden cupolas floating in the brilliantly blue sky, was the schedule for June. The fifteenth, the date when the grandfather's class was to be over, was circled with Misha's red marker. "See, you didn't want to go, but when it's over you will miss it, Father," Misha's mother said when she passed the calendar on her way to dump her plate into the sink. The grandfather only shrugged. He didn't look moved in any way by her words. It was the grandmother who looked moved, even animated, every time June 15 was mentioned. The great things were to be done then. The grandmother spoke about the ten pounds of cucumbers she wanted the grandfather to bring for her from Brighton Beach. "They are twenty-nine cents per pound there! I will make pickles." She also spoke about the plums and apricots she needed for jam, about sour cherries to make sour cherry dumplings, about little hard pears for marinating, about apples for apple pies. She threw longing looks in the direction of the locked-up meat grinder, telling about a wonderful recipe she heard in the dentist's office. "I'll make crazy. Anna Stepanovna says that they come out much better with scallions instead of onions. I'll need a lot of ground beef for them." Then she found a Russian travel agency, which offered discounted tours to elderly people. "We'll go to Boston, to Washington, to Philadelphia. Women in waiting rooms talk about their trips nonstop, and I just sit there too shy to open my mouth. And you will have to go with me," she said to the grandfather. "I won't go alone, as if I weren't married. They put unmarried women on bad seats in the back, next to a toilet." Misha thought that maybe for his grandmother it wasn't such a bad idea to sit next to a toilet, but he didn't say anything. The grandfather didn't say anything either. He only buried himself deeper in his textbook.

On June 2, a weather report on TV showed a neat gray cloud and dense oblique rows of raindrops. "Heavy shower," the grandmother announced, turning the TV off and walking into the kitchen where Misha and the grandfather were doing their homework, or rather sat with their textbooks open. "You're staying home tonight." The sky in the window was mostly gray, but with a few patches of blue. Misha looked farther down. People weren't carrying umbrellas and the gray asphalt of the road was dry and dusty. He looked at his grandfather. The grandfather examined the sky carefully, then lifted the window a few inches up to stick his arm out. The howling gushes of icy wind dashed in, but the arm, although covered with goose bumps, was dry. "We'll come back before the rain starts," he said. The grandmother shrugged.

The first raindrops started falling as soon as they left the building. They made dark marks on the pavement but missed Misha and his grandfather. Then a raindrop fell right on the tip of Misha's nose. He wiped it off. Close to Sheepshead Bay, the grandfather stopped and stuck his open palm out. Some drops fell on it. "It's not rain, is it, Michael?" the grandfather said, turning to Misha and
wiping his damp face with his damp palm. Misha shrugged. They both looked in the direction of the bay. It was very close, they could see the ships, and the dirty-gray high waves, and the tops of the trees bending low under the pressure of the wind. Newspaper pages, probably left on the benches, were flying up. "It's not a heavy rain. Let's make one round. Okay?" Misha nodded, holding tight to his cap. They crossed the street, the only ones to walk in the direction of the park. The majority of people hurried out. Big round raindrops were now falling fast, hitting the pavement one after another with a smacking sound, and turning small wet spots into intricate ornaments, then into puddles. The grandfather stopped hesitantly and looked in the direction of the benches. There was nobody there. "I think we better head home, Michael," the grandfather said. "It's starting to rain."

The heavy downpour reached them while they were waiting for the street light to turn green. With all the wind's howling and sounds of rain, they didn't immediately hear somebody calling for them. Or rather, Misha heard, but he didn't grasp at once that it was his grandfather's name being called. "Grigory Mikhailovich! Grigory Mikhailovich!" Nobody had used his surname since they left Russia. A small old woman in a brown raincoat, holding a plastic bag above her head, was running to them, stumbling in black water-resistant boots too wide for her. Misha pulled the grandfather on the sleeve, making him stop and turn. "Grigory Mikhailovich! Come to my place, come quickly, the boy will catch cold," she said breathlessly, trying to position her plastic bag above Misha's head.

Her place was on the top floor of a three-story brownstone across the street from the park. They walked up a dark staircase, which smelled of something unpleasant. "Cats?" thought Misha, who had never smelled a cat. The woman led the way. She was still out of breath and spoke in short, abrupt sentences. "Poor boy. Grigory Mikhailovich. How could you. In a weather like this. I was there on a bench. But I left. As soon as the rain started. I saw you from across the street. I'm worried about the boy." The grandfather was also out of breath, and silent.

Inside Misha could only notice that the apartment was very small and dimly lit before a big rough towel, smelling of unfamiliar soap, covered his face and shoulders and back. He felt the woman's swift little hands rubbing him. He became ticklish and wanted to sneeze.

"My name is Elena Pavlovna. We go to school together, your grandfather and I," the woman said, after Misha and the grandfather had refused dry sweatpants but accepted dry socks and their shoes had been stuffed with newspapers and put to dry in the bathroom. They were drinking hot chocolate at the one-legged round table in the tiny kitchen. Misha's grandfather and Elena Pavlovna made hot chocolate together. The grandfather was pouring boiling water from the kettle, holding it by the wooden handle with both hands, Elena Pavlovna put the mix into three yellow mugs and moved them closer to the kettle. They said "thank you," "please," and "would you" to each other, and smiled frequently. They spoke like characters in Chekhov's adaptations that Misha's mother loved to watch in Russia, yet Misha could feel that with his grandfather and Elena Pavlovna it wasn't an act. "What's your name?" Elena Pavlovna asked. "Michael," said Misha. "Michael?! You don't look like Michael. Misha would suit you better. Can I call you Misha?" Misha nodded, blowing with pleasure on his too-
hot drink (at home the grandmother usually added cold milk to his cup) and biting on a cookie with delicious raspberry jam inside. "Store-bought," Elena Pavlovna had said. "I don't bake. Why bother when there are so many delicious things sold in bakeries? Right? But that's not the real reason. I am simply a very bad cook." Misha could see that she wasn't ashamed to admit that.

Her apartment was smaller than theirs. One room and a kitchen. It was furnished just like theirs: a hard brown sofa from a cheap Russian furniture store, a scratched coffee table and chest of drawers brought from the garbage, heavy lamps bought at a garage sale. A delicate Russian tea set and books in a dark cabinet with glass doors. Misha read the titles—the same books as they had—Chekhov, Pushkin, historical novels with dark, gloomy covers, Maupassant and Flaubert translated into Russian, thick dictionaries, Russian–English and English–Russian. Some titles were covered with two big photographs. Two serious, curly-headed girls, both older than Misha, on one. "My granddaughters," Elena Pavlovna said with a sigh. "They live in California with my son." On the other picture, black and white, was a smiling young man in a uniform. Her son, Misha thought, but Elena Pavlovna said that it was her husband.

Elena Pavlovna had a braid, a thin gray braid coiled on the back of her head. Misha had never seen an old woman with a braid before. The hair coming out of the braid framed her face with a crown of fluffy grayish-white curls. Her skin was dry and thin with neat little wrinkles that looked drawn on her face with a pencil. Her eyes were small and dark. They misted over when she was reading them her sister's letter from Leningrad. "Everything is the same, the Neva, the embankment, the Winter Palace, only you, Lenochka, are gone." The grandfather patted her hand, showing from a faded blue sleeve, when she said that. She wore a blue woolen dress with the high collar covering her neck and a large amber brooch. "Want to look at my brooch, Misha?" she asked, unpinning it. "My mother said that there was a fly inside." Elena held the large, unpolished piece of amber in his hands. It was cool and smooth on top, rough on the edges. There was a strange black mass inside with thin sprouts looking a little like an insect's legs. "I am not sure, myself, maybe it's just a crack," Elena Pavlovna said. "Do you know, Misha, what amber is?" "Yes," he answered eagerly, turning the piece of amber in his hands. "It's hardened tree tar, flies could get stuck in it while it was still soft and gluey. Yes, I think it is a fly, only a deformed one." Misha raised his eyes off the brooch and blushed, seeing that both Elena Pavlovna and his grandfather looked pleased with what he said.

Outside everything was wet and brightened by the rain. The trees sent showers of raindrops on their heads when they passed under them. They walked very fast, close to each other, their wet shoes squishing on the black wet asphalt. They left Elena Pavlovna's apartment as soon as the rain ended. Their shoes were still damp, but they took the sodden newspapers out and put the shoes on. Elena Pavlovna didn't protest, she didn't say that they must wait, that Misha might catch cold from wearing damp shoes. On the staircase she took his hand in her dry, little one and said: "Come again, Misha." But Misha doubted that he would ever see her again. He also knew that she wasn't to be mentioned at home. They would probably have to say that they waited until the rain was over in a hallway of some building or inside a deli. Elena Pavlovna, a woman with a gray braid and an amber brooch,
would be his and the grandfather's secret. For some reason, Misha felt an urge to take his grandfather's hand, but then he thought that nine-year-old boys don't walk holding their grandfathers' hands. Instead, he began talking about the formation of amber, about volcanoes, about chameleons, about dinosaurs that swallowed big rocks to help them grind the food, about crocodiles that did it too. He talked nonstop, breathlessly, sputtering, chuckling in excitement, interrupting one story to tell the next. He looked at his grandfather, whose eyes were focused on Misha, who nodded in amazement and muttered from time to time: "Imagine!" or "Imagine what living things have to come up with to survive!" And Misha wanted to tell him more to hear the "Imagine!" again and again. Close to their building, the grandfather suddenly stopped, interrupting a story about Komodo dragons. "Misha," he said, sounding a little out of breath. "You know what, my class won't be over on June 15th. I mean it will, but I'll find another class, then another. Misha, there are a lot of free English programs in Brooklyn. You have no idea how many!" A big raindrop fell on the grandfather's head from the tree. It ran down his forehead, lingered on his large nose, and hung on the tip. The grandfather shivered and shook his head like a horse. Misha laughed.
Mistress may refer to: Mistress (lover), a woman, other than the spouse, with whom a married individual has a continuing sexual relationship. Schoolmistress, or female school teacher (also called a schoolmarm). The term is now obsolete in the UK; see Mistress, subst. 1. A. [Dans les pays anglo saxons ou d’expression anglaise ou anglo-american. See a recent post on Tumblr from @lexifindom about mistress. Discover more posts about chastity, keyholder, slave, goddess, denial, leather, and mistress. It’s a pleasant feeling being shared between two dominants. I have personal experience being shared between a Master and a Mistress. I enjoyed it and wish I could experience it again. #bd/sm lifestyle #bd/sm slave #bd/sm kink #mistress #Femdomme #leather. mistress definition: 1. a woman who has control over or responsibility for someone or something: 2. a female school[â€¦]. Learn more. English. Noun. mistress (WOMAN IN CONTROL). mistress (SEXUAL PARTNER). American. Noun. Translations. Grammar. All translations. limit my search to r/mistress. use the following search parameters to narrow your results: subreddit:subreddit. find submissions in "subreddit". author:username. find submissions by "username". site:example.com. get reddit premium. mistress. join leave53,752 readers. 121 users here now. Rules. Get Verified. NSFW Selling Network. /r/The_Dollhouse. Mistress is the feminine form of the English word "master" (master + -ess) and may refer to: Mistress (lover), an old-fashioned term for a woman who is in a sexual and romantic relationship with a man who is married to a different woman. Mistress (form of address), an old-fashioned term for the lady of the house. Ms., original abbreviation. Mistress (college), a female head of a college. Mistress of the Robes, the senior lady of the British Royal Household.